**Most Significant Change Story**

**Nile Basin Development Challenge (NBDC)**

**Title of Story**: Local innovation funds as a spur to integrated action on rainwater management

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**Project**: Nile Basin Development Challenge (NBDC); Nile 2: Integrated Rainwater Management Strategies: Technologies, Institutions and Policies

**Domain**:

**The Story**

This story follows the activities of the woreda level Innovation Platforms (IPs), and shows that the provision of small seed funds, managed by the platforms themselves, is spurring more integrated and locally-tailored action on rainwater management. Baseline research conducted in the three NBDC woredas (Diga, Fogera and Jeldu) indicated that rainwater management planning suffers from a somewhat rigid, top-down approach with limited participation of farmers, little flexibility for action to be adapted to context, and a tendency for sector offices to work under separate plans. This is in spite of the fact that rainwater management cuts across water resource management, crop and livestock management and environmental protection. The Innovation Platforms established in the three sites aimed to overcome these challenges, by creating an opportunity to explore new ways of working which are integrated, participatory and driven by local needs.

In April 2012, a small Innovation Fund (IF) was set up, providing small amounts of money to the IPs on the basis of bottom-up proposals from the platforms for integrated rainwater management pilots. Although challenges remain, it appears that the fund is succeeding in stimulating interest in new ways of working, and a much greater attention to documenting local experiences for learning. For new institutional approaches to resource management to take hold requires long term shifts in the knowledge, attitudes and skills of various stakeholders; involving communities from the beginning of project design, documenting lessons and scaling out successes from the bottom-up are not standard practice. However, pilots supported by the IF are providing an opportunity for local stakeholders to test the value of these approaches, and there are some promising signs of change.

Each platform has designed a pilot programme aimed at tackling soil erosion and land degradation problems and simultaneously increasing productivity. In a series of meetings, initially facilitated by ILRI but with increasing handover of elements to locally identified NGO facilitators, IP members identified critical local challenges and designed joint actions. IPs include a range of stakeholders from government, NGOs and the research community, and their purpose is to strengthen coordination among different actors and initiate shared learning around rainwater management, with the ultimate goal of improving the livelihoods of farmers.

In all three sites the IPs chose to introduce improved fodder management practices, with the twin aim of ameliorating livestock feed shortages and reducing soil erosion. Technical Groups have taken forward implementation of the pilots through a joint planning process including site selection, awareness creation, socio-economic data collection, training for farmers’ group on land preparation and planting, input supply and technical support on land preparation and planting, organisation of field days, and regular meetings to identify refinements needed to the strategy and consider prospects for scaling out.

A notable aspect of the projects is that a learning approach has been taken from the start. New fodder trees and grasses are being tested on a range of land types including communal grazing land, private lands, backyards and on soil and water conservation structures (conservation campaigns are ongoing in the sites, and synergies are being sought), in order to determine the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy. Stakeholders have come together frequently to take joint decisions on every step of the implementation.

Although it is early days, the farmers involved in the pilots report that they have seen promising results and are eager to continue the interventions next season. Farmers have a vision of minimizing free grazing, changing their local breeds to cross breeds for generating more income from milk production and/or fattening, using the grasses and trees to reduce soil erosion and even generating income by developing nurseries to sell seeds from improved fodder species. The IP members seem to be motivated by the interest of farmers, and have expressed a wish to professionalise and systematise their support to farmers on these issues. The University and Research Centers which are members of IPs are also looking to adopt the sites as model areas for integrated rainwater management, to maximise learning.

The following story of events in Fogera illustrates the changes occurring in one site, and is also documented visually in the accompanying photo story.

In Fogera, farmers are fencing what used to be communal free grazing land for the development of fodder trees and grasses, and are also planting on their back yards. Although the intervention started late after the rains, the farmers have seen both grasses and trees take hold. An expert from Andasa Research Centre is working with the woreda livestock agency to provide technical support and advise farmers on feeding and use of the new fodder plants. The experts visit the pilot sites to provide advice, and have also invited farmers to visit livestock research centres where they are encouraged to consider new breeds of cattle which would enable them to diversify into milk production or fattening. The Research Centre will incorporate the field sites into its ongoing research programmes, offering a good chance that lessons are learned and successes can be scaled up.

A field day has also been held during which neighbouring farmers visited the sites, and may have subsequently expressed interest in adopting the new fodder species. The IP technical group has promised to provide inputs and support farmers’ planning, to enable more integrated resource management approaches at landscape level. So far, the farmers and IP members have identified a nursery site for the next season’s multiplication of seeds.

Detailed research on the political economy of the IPs’ activities is ongoing and is expected to generate further lessons, but our initial understanding is that IP members are increasingly seeing the value of a joint decision-making process. This is evidenced in the frequency of discussions which they have undertaken, and in the fact that the IP has now sought to institutionalise the process, sending letters to each member organisation and requesting that they assign a staff member as a regular participant. This should help overcome the challenges currently created by frequent turnover of individuals within the IPs.

Probably the main remaining gap is in establishing effective modes of interaction between the IPs and the communities themselves. ILRI has taken various steps to bring communities into the IP process, for example through the use of participatory video and training IP members in participatory planning, and there have been varying degrees of community engagement in the design of the IF projects, but there is still some way to go before communities are equal partners in the IP process. In particular, there is scope to involve a wider range of community members and ensure equity of benefits. Currently those who do not own livestock or land have not benefited, and there is a risk that some may lose out (for example some have previously collected cattle dung from free grazing areas which are no longer available). Equity issues and community participation will be the main focus of further research and support to the IPs over the next year.

**Lessons learnt so far:**

* With little seed money IPs can design and implement joint works that will bring impact among small scale farmers, but there is a need for improved budget management systems.
* IP members should be trained in action research and participatory approaches that will help the successful implementation of the pilot by building local research capacity.
* Farmers trust can be built through participatory approach in the process of designing and implementing the pilot that will solve their problems. But engendering meaningful community participation in decision-making is not a simple matter of training IP members in participatory planning and requires ongoing engagement and support.
* Staff turnover at local level challenges the IP in terms of knowledge building and learning, and makes joint action less effective. Making institutional membership for identified appropriate professionals and experts representing their organization is vital.
* IPs should be hosted under the established local organisation for its future sustainability.
* Establishment of Nursery sites is vital for the next season implementation of the pilot, and will enable farmers to access inputs within their local area.

**Future consideration and next activities**

* Capacity building for local facilitators and IP members on action research methodology and process documentation
* Supporting the IPs in identifying sources of funds to extend and scale up activities.
* Strengthening the participation of research centres and universities in the IP activities and maintain the joint planning to be implemented on the ground.
* Initiate cross-sharing of the experiences between the three sites to help broaden their knowledge and attitude from different perspectives
* Working more on linking the intervention with the existing government existing structure for creating a buy in among the institutions at woreda level for its sustainability
* To ensure sustainability’s of IPs capacity building on action research approach and facilitation skill needs to be provided for members and also embed IPs in local institutions

**Photo story of showing the process of the pilot project main activities at Fogera**

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**Awareness creation, training, land preparation, in put supply, 2nd round training, weeding …**

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**Weeding by young, backyard fodder development by women, Dr Kindu’s and Abera’s visit, field days…**

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**Field day discussions, visit by Abera and Zelalem with TG, farmers harvesting, and TG meeting**